

Soaring Pride

XY Lau

“Let’s go around in a circle. State your name and where you’re from.”

Oh no, not this again.

“Hi, I’m Jack. I’m from Detroit, Michigan.”

Why do we have to do this in every class?

“My name is Tim, and I am from Annapolis, Maryland.”

I’m coming up soon... how am I going to phrase it this time?

“I’m Jake. I’m from Florida.”

Okay, well, here we go again...

“Hi! I’m XY, which is short for my Chinese name, Xiang Yi. I was born in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, but grew up in Shanghai, China, where I learned English from an American International school.”

Nailed it.

I have written way too many essays about my name. These papers defined my days learning at an international school, sharing classes with classmates of all nations, so like – yet so unlike – me. Ever since I picked up my pen, each one of my English teachers would face my multicolored, multicultural class and throw out this “find out what your name means” assignment. And with every passing year, the teachers seemed increasingly excited and pleased with themselves about this project, as if they all thought they were being original.

刘翔毅 These characters that my father gingerly handpicked out of a pool of Chinese alphabet soup mean a lot more when written this way than they do in their English phonetic translation: Lau Xiang Yi. Standing testament to my Chinese identity, these three little bundles hold the high hopes of my family, as well as the essence of my personality within their complicated meshes of dots and lines. 翔, or Xiang, means “to soar,” while 毅, or Yi, means “pride.”

Crowned with my surname, 刘(Lau), my purpose in life, according to my given moniker, is to be the Lau who Soars with Pride.

I can recall those early days growing up, when I was the center of attention in the family. I was the son of the pride of the Lau family – the son of my father, who was the first person in the family to ever attend and graduate from university. I knew from a young age that to be my father’s son – to be given a name like Xiang Yi – meant that big things were expected of me. After all, the son of the victorious son can and should bring only prosperity to the family.

If one were to carefully examine the very spelling of my name, one would discover a subtle fact about my family before ever meeting me in person. The name Lau Xiang Yi indicates the Chinese melting pot that I was born into. In Malaysia, where the struggling Chinese minority from a variety of regions (Fujian, Hainan, and Canton) set aside their differences to form a unified Chinese front, my family ended up becoming a mix of all three of these regions. My surname, Lau, is the Hokkien and Cantonese translation of the character 刘 while my first name, Xiang Yi, is a Mandarin translation of 翔毅. Any expert who notices this subtle quirk in my name will uncover the intercultural, intra- cultural mix of my Canto-Hokkien, essentially Chinese, family.

On the first day of July 1997, the British government returned Hong Kong to China. For the first time in nearly a century, the citizens of this decolonized state finally received a nationality guaranteed by a people who looked more like their own: a Han Chinese-dominated government residing in central Beijing.

The mood in the air could not have been more lively – thousands of angry demonstrators took to the streets in a mass protest, and have taken to the streets on every first of July since then (activists claim that the 2012 demonstrations drew a record turnout of 400,000 people). The residents of Hong Kong complained that this new government planned to “strip them of their culture” by enforcing its “communist principles” on their traditional Chinese customs. The rest of the world balked at the bizarre spectacle of this small state, one that spent generations under western rule, fighting to keep its “culture” free from the clutches of the original nation from which it came.

My friends from Hong Kong cringe at the sound of being called “local Chinese.” To them, the authenticity of the term died with the Cultural Revolution. While colonial Hong Kong was actually allowed to keep and nurture its traditional Chinese culture, Communist China hacked out and burned its roots in a blood oath to the new order. The Cultural Revolution saw young, ignorant Red Guards painting the skies crimson with the inferno of burning books and blazing temples. The cries of the old Chinese principles, dragged out and slaughtered to make room for a new religion under Mao, rose and mingled with the smoke; in the span of just ten years, the indoctrinated kids managed to wipe out over five thousand years of Chinese heritage and tradition. The bottom line was that the “local Chinese” people who waved goodbye to their newly colonized brothers in 1898 looked nothing like the “local Chinese” people to whom these brothers returned in 1997. In fact, throughout the first half of the 20th century, a good portion of these original “local Chinese” people sensed the incoming tsunamis of change and fled their homeland in droves while they still could,

taking their traditions with them and congregating into little Chinese communities in foreign countries all over the world. And ever since they ran away, China has never been the same.

I come from a family of such runaways. My ancestors escaped to Malaysia right at the end of the dynasties, during the waning of the Middle Kingdom under the Emperor's dragon. In the absence of my kin, China set off on its Long March towards agrarian communism, forfeiting its role as the guardian of its traditions. In a sense, as my family embarked on its journey, they were passed the baton of Chinese culture to share and preserve with the rest of the escaped Chinese families who now reside in the Chinatowns all over the world.

While the "local Chinese" children back in the motherland spent their summers learning and reciting the words of their beloved Party, I spent my childhood summers following my grandma through the sweltering heat of Malaysia, handing her incense sticks to poke into pots of ashes before bowing up and down three times in prayer to my ancestors. While "local Chinese" grandparents complained about how the West was ruining the old Communist principles, my grandparents complained about how the West was ruining the old, *traditional* Chinese principles. While "local Chinese" mothers escaped overseas to give birth to American, Australian, and British citizens who would one day attend international schools worldwide in the hopes of a future *anywhere else but here*, my father sat me down right before I left for America and reminded me for the hundredth time, "never forget that you are a Chinese."

I took my father's words to heart. I spent my first month at American University telling everybody of life at home, dispelling the appalling myths and prejudices of China that met me wherever I went. "Don't listen to him," I would hear the 'local Chinese' kids exclaim behind me all the time, "Who does he think he is, anyway? He's not even a *real* Chinese."

I guess they do have a point. My name may say a lot about my cultural heritage, but it says very little of the life that I have led. My name does not, for example, account for the Chinese 30-day Tourist Visa that I have in my Malaysian Passport. It does not account for the American-International high school that I attended when I stayed in China as an outsider. My name does not mention the numerous times that I walked down the streets of Shanghai, completely invisible in a sea of twenty million people until I opened my mouth to reveal the foreign boy within the Chinese skin, opening myself up to being spoken to and then passed around like a foreigner. It does not mention the times I drifted down the streets of Kuala Lumpur, avoided like a foreigner as well.

In fact, my name does not mention the times in China when I wished I were "home" in Malaysia, or the times in Malaysia, when I wished I were "home" in China. From these incidents of longing sprouted great bouts of confusion in my first days of university at American— while people around me complained of homesickness, I still struggled to define where my home truly was.

My name, soaked in the waters of a Confucian filial piety, does not show that I am just as close to my mother as I am to my father, that a good portion of my attitudes and approaches to life had been, for the most part, taught by Mom, since Dad would work the late nights all the time. As my name roars of victory and triumph, it does not take heed of the failures and downfalls in my

adolescence that only my mother and I, or sometimes just I alone, know about. As I, the Lau who soars with Pride, lived a few thousand miles away in Shanghai from my family back home in Kuala Lumpur, I took advantage of the shameful privilege of flying away from China every Chinese New Year to bring home to my Malaysian family all my good news, and somehow to always fail to mention any bad news.

Now that I live by myself in America, a few thousand miles away from both my immediate family in Shanghai and my extended family in Malaysia, it scares me to realize how much of the truth I can neglect to send home. Without Mom, Dad, or Mei (my sister) watching me by my side, it soon registered that there was only so much that I could write in the limited text messages I sent their way every night. Like the single, or dual-cultured kids around me who could not possibly begin to comprehend my life, even my family will now receive an incomplete, iPhone screen-sized picture of my daily life. Upon grasping the fact that from now on, only I and nobody else would know who I truly am, I find myself submerged into a bizarre cocktail of melancholic, contradicting sentiments. My Third Culture Kid instincts have kicked into full throttle, and I have never felt so liberated, yet so isolated at the same time.

My name, in itself, neglects to show that I consider myself to be a Sino- Malaysian-*American*. In fact, most Americans cringe whenever I tell them that my name is Xiang Yi. The first time I travelled to the States (and choked on the clean, unpolluted air), I was constantly asked whether I had a nickname immediately after I introduced myself; when I said I didn't, I was met with a forced smile and a quick handshake before I proceeded to be neglected, avoided, and/or completely forgotten. As people grew increasingly embarrassed of either mispronouncing or completely forgetting my name, I quickly shortened my name from Xiang Yi to just the initials, XY. And that, I can safely say, became one of the most significant decisions I have ever made for myself.

“XY,” I soon realized, was a lot easier to remember than “Xiang Yi,” and, to my teenage delight, a lot cooler. I earned a fresh new audience with this name, and every visit I paid to the US since was a bonanza. As if XY was not amazing enough, it yielded a roll of nicknames for itself: XYZ, Chromosome... jesting friends even started calling me Sex-Y. I had, in other words, successfully Americanized my name with just a couple of capital letters.

“I gave all of you Cs on the test. Don't come to me and complain about it. You got what you deserved. You Chinese kids have to learn that your GPA is not the thing that will get you into college.”

I would be lying if I denied the warped exposure to Americana I received before I ever set foot on this country. This “GPA is not what will get you into college” argument was used by so many reckless American teacher- vigilantes at my school who, for some reason, made it their personal mission to destroy our paths to America by attempting to “Americanize” us. In their crusades to rid us of the “shallow” Asian, study-hard mentality, they managed to deny the A's to those who truly deserved it, and to amplify (and sometimes even exalt) the behaviors of those who did not try at all.

“What is a Democrat, and what is a Republican?” I remember asking my teacher. It was the 2008 presidential elections, and the polls were rolling in on the live CNN stream at our auditorium. Donkeys and elephants rolled back and forth on the screen, and my 8th grade self was trying to make sense of all the fuss. “If you’re a Democrat, you’re awesome,” the kid next to me shouted to the class, “And if you’re a Republican, you’re evil!” Our teacher cracked up, doubling over with laughter for a whole minute before finally throwing up her hands and exclaimed, “Yup. Pretty much.”

Later that day, I joined the rest of my friends to heckle and browbeat little Timothy Yin, the Ohio-born Chinese kid who was the only Republican in our grade. “You’re a racist!” we yelled, “You hate Obama! You like McCain! You like old men!” Our screams echoed the hallways, as little Tim cowered in the bathroom.

It was not until I took an American History class two years later when I learned the true definitions behind the two parties. This was when I realized that, after spending my whole life in constant fear of the Chinese communist government one day returning to its socialist roots and seizing my family’s assets, perhaps I would actually prefer a smaller government under a proper, non-interventionist Republican party as well.

After my first two months at American, I realized I belonged to so many places at once that I truly didn’t belong anywhere at all. I first found myself at a Chinese Students at AU party, nervously laughing with my peers at jokes I didn’t understand. Indeed, the “local Chinese” kids were right; the China that I preached to my friends about was truly the view of an outsider, someone who never fit into the fabric of “local China.” A few days later, I was invited to a South-East Asian Students at AU party as well, to which I was asked to wear “traditional Malaysian garments” (which I didn’t have), and to sing a song in Malaysian (which I didn’t speak). Arriving at the social with a dress shirt and a Chinese song ready to play, I closed down the night singing an unknown song that nobody sang along to. I walked into these social events yearning to reconnect with my former self, and I walked out feeling I would never find it again.

My iPhone screen-sized window shows me that my former life back at home has transformed. Change is the motto of any international community; I used to change with the community in Shanghai, but ever since I moved away, it has changed without me. Old, ugly buildings that Mei and I would pass by every day on our way to school have been torn down and replaced with new, uglier ones. Some old families with whom I used to share a warm, intimate relationships have long moved away, replaced with new families that I can only meet through a cold, flat screen. The people from my international Class of 2013 now lead their own lives on all corners of the globe, busying themselves with colleges, or army trainings, or gap years. Soon even my sister and her class will march towards an eventful future, branching out across the map of the world. As the wonderland of Shanghai that I took for granted slowly mutated with time, I started losing hope of ever going back to a home that stayed exactly the way I left it. Not much time passed before I found myself longing to return to a place that didn’t exist anymore.

“Never forget that you are Chinese,” my dad told me. Last night, I arrived back in my American room after watching an epic American movie with my pleasant American friends. I took out my American iPhone to put on some soft, American jazz, bending down to turn up the volume of my American speakers. I emptied the American change from my American jacket pockets before changing into my American sweatshirt. It was not until I opened that bag of American chips like a true, stereotypical American when I glanced into my American mirror to see a Chinese face staring back at me. I let out an old- fashioned, American gasp. I had already forgotten who I was.

As the calendar on my wall slims down with every passing month, my phases of melancholy slim down with it. I have started to refer to myself less as the outsider from nowhere, and more as the American from another universe. In my universe, people all speak English with the proper American accent, but can speak with two or three other accents as well. In my America, barely anybody understands the thrill of baseball, as swimming is the dominant sport. In my universe, Americans are all classy blues and jazz lovers, flaunting mojos with a tasteful flow, animating the nightclubs with smoke and groove.

In my America, I adopt new values to add to my traditional, Chinese principles. It takes a certain amount of time living in interdependent independence for one to realize that true beauty lies not in appearance, but in a person’s ability to view his life through many eyes and still stand proud in his originality. Perhaps that’s what my father meant when he reminded me not to forget who I am. Perhaps that’s what he meant when he named me Soaring Pride. The Chinese Phoenix in me that once flew with such passion and grace has transformed into an American Eagle, and it soars higher than ever.
